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SDI, Arms Control, and Stability: Toward a New Synthesis

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Following is an address by Paul H. Nitze, Special Adviser to the President and the Secretary of State on Arms Control Matters, before the Time *Magazine Conference on SDI [Strategic Defense Initiative], Washington, D.C., June 3, 1986.*

The primary security objective of the United States is to reduce the risk of war while preserving our liberty and democratic political system. Over the past 25 years, the United States has pursued this objective through two related means. We have sought to deter war by maintaining a force structure adequate to convince potential adversaries that the risks and costs of aggression would far outweigh any possible gains. Simultaneously, we have sought to limit the nature and extent of the threat to the United States and to stabilize the strategic relationship with our principal adversary, the Soviet Union, through arms control agreements.

The United States is now engaged in research to find out if new technologies could provide a more stable basis to deter war in the future by a shift to a greater reliance on strategic defenses. Arms control could also play an important role in designing a more stable strategic regime in the future. Tonight, I propose to examine the relationship among SDI, arms control, and stability. I hope to show that our SDI research and arms control policies, as currently defined, provide a cohesive and firm basis for enhancing strategic stability in the future and ultimately for reducing the risk of war.

Arms Control and Stability

Two important corollaries to the objective of reducing the risk of war are the objectives of assuring overall functional equality between the capabilities of the two sides and of assuring crisis stability. Crisis stability implies a situation in which no nation has an incentive to execute a first strike in a serious crisis or, in peacetime, to provoke a crisis that might lead to a military confrontation. This situation obtains if no significant advantage can be achieved by initiating conflict. Equivalently, crisis stability also implies that a potential aggressor perceives that he could end up in no better a military position after expending a major portion of his forces in executing the attack and then absorbing a retaliation than would the defender after absorbing the attack and retaliating. These two goals—assuring overall functional equality and crisis stability—are closely interrelated. The United States cannot tolerate either significant inequality or substantial crisis instability.

Trends in the strategic balance over the past 15 years lend new meaning and importance to these classical goals. The growth of Soviet capability to destroy hardened targets—such as ICBM [intercontinental ballistic missile] silos in an initial strike, with their large, land-based, MIRVed [multiple independently-targetable reentry vehicle] ballistic missiles—has created a serious force structure asymmetry and a growing danger of instability in a crisis. Soviet strategic defense activities, coupled with a military doctrine that stresses the importance of offensive and defensive force interactions to achieve Soviet aims in any conflict, have likewise been threatening.

Both the United States and the Soviet Union recognize that it is the balance between the offense-defense mixes of both sides that determines the strategic nuclear relationship. The Soviet Union must realize that a successful "creepout" or "breakout" in its strategic defense capabilities, or conversely, unilateral restraint by the United States in this area, would further shift the strategic nuclear balance in its favor and potentially undermine the value to the United States and its allies of U.S. deterrent forces. Through its ongoing overt and covert defense activities and its arms control policies, the Soviet Union has been attempting to foster such a shift. Currently, in the arms control arena, the Soviet Union seeks to protect the gains that it has achieved in the strategic nuclear balance by limiting and delaying U.S. defense programs, especially SDI. This focus on SDI reflects Soviet concern over the fact that they are no longer alone in their exploration of the defensive potential of advanced technologies and over the prospect of having to divert resources from proven ballistic missile programs to high-technology programs in fields where we are likely to have a competitive advantage.

U.S. arms control efforts are oriented toward achieving strategically significant and stabilizing reductions.

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For example, we seek to lower the ratio of accurate warheads to strategic aimpoints and reduce a potential attacker's confidence in his ability to eliminate effective retaliation. I should note that while the role of arms control in enhancing U.S. security and in bringing about a more stable strategic relationship is important, it is secondary to what we are able and willing to do for ourselves. U.S. strategic modernization programs provide the necessary foundation on which our deterrence and arms control policies must rest. SDI should be understood in the context of the goals of our modernization and arms control policies and the dangers inherent in the future possibility of having deterrent forces inadequate to respond to, and thus deter, the threat.

We should make no mistake about the fact that Soviet offensive and defensive capabilities pose real threats to the security of the West. Our work in SDI is, in part, a reaction to the unabated growth of this threat, especially during the last 15 years. Through SDI, we seek both new capabilities and a new approach to rectify the deteriorating strategic balance.

The ABM Treaty and the Origins of SDI

The President's March 1983 speech expressed his strongly held belief that we should reexamine the basis of our deterrent posture to see if we could deter aggression through a greater reliance on defense rather than relying so heavily on the threat of devastating nuclear retaliation. This belief reflects both our disappointment in the deterioration of the strategic balance since the signing of the SALT I [strategic arms limitation talks] agreements and our hope that new defensive technologies can mitigate adverse developments in the area of strategic offensive weaponry.

The United States in the early 1970s had proceeded from the assumption that the strict limitation of defenses in the ABM [Anti-Ballistic Missile] Treaty would provide the basis for significant reductions in offensive weaponry. The theory was simple: if both sides had survivable retaliatory nuclear forces at about the same level of capability and both sides were otherwise effectively defenseless against the nuclear capability of the other, then neither side would have an incentive to strike first, regardless of the circumstances. Therefore, significant reductions to equal levels of capability, tailored so as to enhance security, would improve the security of both sides.

However, the Soviets showed little readiness during the SALT negotiations to agree to measures which would result in meaningful limits or cuts in offensive nuclear forces. Within the framework of the SALT I interim agreement and SALT II, the Soviets deployed large numbers of MIRVed ballistic missiles of sufficient throw-weight and accuracy to pose an evident threat to the survivability of the entire land-based portion of U.S. retaliatory forces. This violated a basic premise of the SALT process. The growth in Soviet nuclear capabilities, in general, and in the asymmetry in counterforce capabilities, in particular, is fundamentally inimical to the security of the United States and its allies.

Despite erosion of the value of the ABM Treaty through Soviet noncompliance and through the absence of comparable Soviet restraints on offensive systems, the United States is and will continue to remain in full compliance with its ABM Treaty obligations. A principal factor leading to that accord was the conclusion reached in the United States during the ABM debate of the late 1960s that defenses, at the then-existing level of technology, could be overwhelmed at less cost by additional offensive systems than would be required to add balancing defenses. Therefore, we were concerned that the deployment of a relatively ineffective territorial ABM system on either side could prompt a proliferation of offensive nuclear forces and cheap but effective countermeasures. An ABM system based on then-current technology would not have been militarily effective, survivable, or cost-effective at the margin.

By contrast, our interest in SDI research is premised on the judgment that new technologies may now be available that could reverse our judgments of the late 1960s about the military ineffectiveness, vulnerability, and cost-ineffectiveness of strategic defenses. It is important to keep in mind that these three requirements are as relevant today as they were 16 years ago; it is the capabilities of the technologies that may have changed.

The SDI Decision Criteria: A Path to Stability

The President's Strategic Defense Initiative, published in January 1985 as the most authoritative description of the President's vision, discussed these requirements for an effective defense. These criteria are posited as necessary for maintaining stability.

To achieve the benefits which advanced technologies may be able to offer, defenses must be militarily effective. Defenses must be able, at a minimum, to destroy a sufficient portion of an aggressor's attacking forces to deny him confidence in the attack's outcome, in general, and, in particular, to deny him the ability to destroy a significant portion of the military target sets he would need to destroy.

The exact level of defense system capability required to achieve these ends cannot be determined at this time, since it depends on the size, composition, effectiveness, and inherent survivability of U.S. forces relative to those of the Soviet Union at the time that defenses are introduced. However, in addition to the requirement of military effectiveness, two other necessary characteristics of an effective defense have been identified and constitute current presidential policy as put forth in a recent National Security Decision Directive. They are survivability and cost-effectiveness at the margin.

Survivability is defined not in terms of system invulnerability but the ability of a system "to maintain a sufficient degree of effectiveness to fulfill its mission, even in the face of determined attacks against it." The President's analysis characterizes survivability as "essential not only to maintain the effectiveness of a defense system, but to maintain stability." Vulnerable defenses could, in a crisis, provide the offense with incentives to initiate defense suppression attacks to gain a favorable shift in the offense-defense balance as a prelude to a first strike.

Similarly, in the interest of discouraging the proliferation of ballistic missile forces, the defensive system must be able to maintain its effectiveness against the offense at less cost than it would take to develop offensive countermeasures and proliferate the ballistic missiles necessary to overcome it. This is the concept of cost-effectiveness at the margin. It describes the stability of the competitive relationship between one side's defensive forces and the other side's offensive forces—that is, whether one side has major incentives to add additional offensive forces in an effort to overcome the other side's defenses.

The term cost-effectiveness is expressed in economic terms. While this concept has valid application not only for strategic defenses but for other military systems as well, the United States understands the criterion of cost-effectiveness at the margin to be more than an economic concept.

In particular, we need to be concerned, in our evaluation of options generated by SDI research, with the degree to which certain types of defensive systems encourage or discourage an adversary to attempt to overwhelm them with additional offensive systems and countermeasures. We seek defensive options which provide clear disincentives to attempts to counter them with additional offensive forces.

Our continued adherence to these criteria indicates the deep interest that the United States has in maintaining and enhancing stability. The United States is demonstrating this interest in other ways as well. In particular, our goals related to a possible transition to greater reliance on defenses, together with our view of SDI as a means of enhancing deterrence and stabilizing the U.S.-Soviet balance and not as a means of achieving superiority, underscore our concern for stability.

Assuring Confidence in Our SDI Research

President Reagan personally assured General Secretary Gorbachev at last November's summit that the United States seeks to enhance peace and that we are pursuing SDI as part of our effort to enhance deterrence and global stability. In this regard, as we have repeatedly made clear, the United States is conducting research only on defensive systems, with primary emphasis on non-nuclear technologies. While it is difficult to be certain of capabilities of potential systems based on technologies not yet developed, defenses based on the new technologies we are investigating would not have the role of striking targets on the ground.

Despite Soviet unwillingness during the first four rounds of the nuclear and space talks to engage in meaningful dialogue in the defense and space negotiating group, the United States has consistently demonstrated in our statements and actions that we do not seek to gain a unilateral advantage from strategic defense. This openness stands in marked contrast to the closed nature of Soviet strategic defensive activities, the intentions of which we must extrapolate from an operationally offensive Soviet military doctrine with heavy emphasis on strategic defense and from the unabated growth in Soviet nuclear weapons capabilities.

Consistent with our traditional emphasis on verification, the United States does not expect the Soviet Union to accept our assurances on faith alone. On the contrary, in Geneva we have made concrete proposals which would enable the United States and the Soviet Union to assess the defensive nature of the research being conducted by each side.

If and when our research criteria are met, and following close consultation with our allies, we intend to consult and negotiate, as appropriate, with the Soviets pursuant to the terms of the ABM Treaty, which provide for such consultations on how deterrence could be enhanced through a greater reliance by both sides on new defensive systems. It is our intention and our hope that, if new defensive technologies prove feasible, we—in close and continuing consultation with our allies—and the Soviets will jointly manage a transition to a more defense-reliant balance. A jointly managed transition would be designed to maintain, at all times, control over the mix of offensive and defensive systems, thereby assuring both sides of the stability of the evolving strategic balance. An implicit goal of a jointly managed transition would be to identify in advance potential problems in, for example, the stability of the mix of offense and defense and to act to resolve such problems.

Of course, arms control would play an important role in such a transition. Properly structured cuts in offensive arms are not only worthwhile in their own right but they could also facilitate the shift to a more defense-reliant posture. Unilateral modernization measures can enhance transition stability. Improving the survivability of our offensive forces, for example, would especially contribute to stability in an early transition phase.

Our interest in pursuing a cooperative transition with the Soviets should not be seen, however, as granting them veto power over U.S. decisionmaking. Any U.S. decision to develop and deploy defenses would still reflect the same goals of peace and enhanced deterrence through a stable transition, even if our good faith efforts to engage the Soviets in a cooperative transition were to fail. I am convinced, however, that a successful SDI research phase proving the feasibility of survivable and cost-effective defenses would provide compelling incentives for the Soviets to consider seriously the advantages of a jointly managed transition. In Geneva, we seek to provide a forum for such consideration.

Balancing Offense and Defense in Geneva

The Soviet approach in Geneva has been to advance the self-serving and unacceptable concepts of "a ban on space-strike arms" and "a ban on purposeful research," both impossible to define in meaningful and verifiable terms. They would like to limit U.S. capabilities and stop U.S. research while avoiding constraints on their own weapon systems and research through definitional ploys.

The United States is committed to the SDI research program, which is being carried out in full compliance with all of our treaty obligations, including the ABM Treaty. Indeed, the United States seeks to reverse the erosion of existing agreements, including the ABM Treaty, caused by Soviet violations. In seeking to stop or delay SDI, the Soviet Union also talks about strengthening the ABM Treaty. However, their approach for doing so has so far been based on artificial distinctions such as that between "purposeful" and "fundamental" research.

The Soviets maintain that deep cuts are only possible, and that stability can only be preserved, if the United States agrees to halt substantive work on SDI. The United States cannot accept this thesis. We propose, instead, a serious discussion on the offense-defense relationship and the outlines of the future offense-defense balance. Were the Soviets to work with us in a meaningful exploration of significant reductions in START [strategic arms reduction talks] and INF [intermediate-range nuclear forces], we could examine how the level of defense would logically be affected by the level and nature of offensive arms.

The ABM Treaty marked the beginning of an arms control process which, in retrospect, has been profoundly disappointing. The offensive reductions which were supposed to accompany it have not materialized, and the Soviets are in fundamental violation of one or more of the treaty's key provisions. Consequently, we are working to halt the treaty's erosion by the Soviet Union and persuade them that full compliance with its terms by both sides is in our mutual interest.

The United States does not believe that there is reason now to change the ABM Treaty. Through our SDI research, we wish to determine whether or not there is a better way to ensure long-term stability than to rely on the ever more dangerous threat of devastating nuclear retaliation to deter war and assure peace. If we find there is, and if at some future time the United States, in close consultation with its allies, decides to proceed with deployment of

defensive systems, we intend to utilize mechanisms for U.S.-Soviet consultations provided for in the ABM Treaty. Through such mechanisms, and taking full account of the Soviet Union's own expansive defensive systems research program, we will seek to proceed in a stable fashion with the Soviet Union. In this context, we must remember that the ABM Treaty is a living document.

Articles XIII and XIV provide for consultation with the aim of appropriate amendment of the treaty to take account of future considerations, such as the possibility of a new—and more stable—strategic balance.

Toward A New Synthesis

Current U.S. SDI research activities and arms control policies are designed to provide a basis for securing stability in a future strategic regime. The goal of stability can be guaranteed only if we maintain our commitment to the standards and criteria consistent with it.

The United States is committed to achieving strategic stability and, therefore, to a predictable and stable arms control process to complement our strategic programs to assure our primary security objective of reducing the risk of war. ■

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